

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 EUR-08 NSCE-00 SP-02 INR-05
CIAE-00 NSAE-00 SAA-01 SES-01 SSO-00 INRE-00 /039 W
-----099387 242109Z /73

O 241808Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5090
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 10906

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IS
SUBJECT: THE STATE OF THE ALIGNMENT: SLOW TO RECOVER AND
WAITING FOR CAMP DAVID

REF: TEL AVIV 10497

1. SUMMARY: THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT'S STRENGTH OWES MUCH
TO THE WEAKNESS OF THE OPPOSITION. MORE THAN A YEAR
AFTER ITS SHATTERING DEFEAT IN THE LAST KNESSET ELECTION,
THE ALIGNMENT IS STILL IN THE EARLY STAGES OF A RECOVERY
WHICH BEGAN HALTINGLY LAST WINTER. TO LABOR'S SURPRISE,
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THE TROUBLED STATE OF THE ECONOMY, INCLUDING THE CONTINU-
ING HIGH RATE OF INFLATION, HAD LITTLE EFFECT ON THE
LIKUD'S POPULARITY. WITH THE SLOW-DOWN IN THE PEACE
PROCESS, LABOR BEGAN TO ATTACK THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT ON
FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES, PARTICULARLY BEGIN'S IDEOLOGICAL
STAND ON THE WEST BANK. DURING JUNE AND JULY, THE
GOVERNMENT'S PROBLEMS IN RESPONDING TO THE AMERICAN

QUESTIONS COMBINED WITH THE MOMENTARY PUBLICITY ACCORDED TO PERES' VIENNA MEETING WITH SADAT TO GIVE THE ALIGNMENT A NEW MOMENTUM IN ITS RECOVERY CAMPAIGN. IN THE LAST THREE WEEKS, HOWEVER, LABOR'S OFFENSIVE HAS FALTERED AND THE PARTY NOW AWAITS THE OUTCOME OF THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT. ALTHOUGH RABIN APPEARS TO HAVE RECENTLY MOUNTED HIS OWN COMEBACK CAMPAIGN, PERES' PERCH AS THE PARTY'S LEADER IS SECURE FOR THE TIME BEING. DESPITE PREVIOUS HOPES TO THE CONTRARY, MOST OF THE PARTY'S LEADERSHIP NOW BELIEVE THAT LABOR'S CHANCE WILL NOT COME BEFORE THE NEXT ELECTION. MEANWHILE, THE ALIGNMENT IS ATTEMPTING TO RETURN TO ITS PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIALIST ROOTS WITHOUT ABANDONING THE CENTER BY MOVING LEFT. ITS FORTUNES IN THE SHORT RUN HANG ON THE OUTCOME OF THE CAMP DAVID CONFERENCE. A SUCCESSFUL SUMMIT WOULD FURTHER STALL THE ALIGNMENT'S ATTEMPTS AT A COMEBACK, WHILE FAILURE AT CAMP DAVID COULD GREATLY IMPROVE ITS CHANCES IF MOST ISRAELIS BELIEVED THAT BEGIN'S HANDLING OF THE NEGOTIATIONS WAS FAULTY. HOWEVER, LABOR'S LONG-TERM PROSPECTS HINGE ON ITS COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE PROBLEM OF RELATING ITS IDEOLOGY TO THE CONCERNS OF THE PUBLIC. IN FOREIGN POLICY, THIS MEANS FINDING THE RIGHT FORMULA OF OFFERING THE PUBLIC AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE LIKUD'S MAXIMALIST POSITIONS, WHILE AVOIDING THE NARROW CONFINES OF A DOCTRINAIRE PARTY OUT OF STEP WITH THE MASSES. THIS IS NOT YET HAPPENING.

END SUMMARY'

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2. A CENTRAL FACTOR IN THE ENDURING STRENGTH OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN THE WEAKNESS AND DISARRAY OF THE MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY. MORE THAN A YEAR AFTER ITS SHATTERING DEFEAT IN THE LAST KNESSET ELECTION, THE LABOR ALIGNMENT IS ONLY NOW OVERCOMING ITS OBSESSION WITH THAT TRAUMATIC EVENT. THERE WERE SEVERAL EXTERNAL REASONS FOR THE ALIGNMENT'S SLOW START IN PULLING ITSELF TOGETHER. INITIALLY, THE BEGIN CABINET PRESENTED THE APPEARANCE OF A STRONG, DECISIVE AND UNITED GOVERNMENT. AND EVEN BEFORE THE ALIGNMENT HAD DECIDED ON WHETHER TO EMPHASIZE FOREIGN OR DOMESTIC POLICY ON ITS LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY, IT HAD TO OBSERVE TWO TRIUMPHS FOR THE LIKUD IN QUICK SUCCESSION: THE ENTRANCE OF THE DMC INTO THE COALITION, WHICH ROBBED THE ALIGNMENT OF A POTENTIAL PARTNER, AND SADAT'S DRAMATIC VISIT TO JERUSALEM. PUBLICATION OF BEGIN'S PEACE PLAN THREW THE ALIGNMENT INTO MORE CONFUSION. BECAUSE OF WHAT IT SAW AS BEGIN'S SWEEPING CONCESSIONS IN THE SINAI, LABOR FOUND ITSELF IN THE INCONGRUOUS POSITION OF ATTACKING THE GOVERNMENT FROM THE RIGHT. MEANWHILE, POLLS REVEALED THAT AN ELECTION AT THAT TIME (DECEMBER-JANUARY) WOULD HAVE GIVEN THE LIKUD

A CLEAR MAJORITY, WHILE THE ALIGNMENT WOULD HAVE SUFFERED FURTHER SETBACKS.

3. A HALTING TURN-AROUND BEGAN LAST WINTER WITH THE DISSIPATION OF MOMENTUM IN THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND THE GOVERNMENT'S CLUMSY AND PROVOCATIVE SETTLEMENTS ACTIVITY. ARMED WITH THESE ISSUES AND HELPED ALONG BY THE PEACE NOW MOVEMENT, AT LONG LAST LABOR STARTED TO REVIVE. MANY IN THE ALIGNMENT WOULD HAVE PREFERRED EXPLOITING DOMESTIC

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ISSUES. BUT, TO LABOR'S SURPRISE, THE TROUBLED STATE OF THE ECONOMY DID LITTLE TO AFFECT THE LIKUD'S POPULARITY. ACHIEVING PEACE CONTINUED TO PREOCCUPY THE PUBLIC, ECLIPSING POCKETBOOK ISSUES LIKE INFLATION.

4. LABOR STARTED HAMMERING AWAY AT BEGIN'S DEVOTION TO THE ENTIRETY OF THE WEST BANK, LABELING IT A PRESCRIPTION FOR DESTROYING THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PEACE AND ALIENATING AMERICAN OPINION. THE ALIGNMENT ATTACKED THE GOVERNMENT'S

HIGHLY EQUIVOCAL RESPONSE IN JUNE TO THE USG QUESTIONS AS
DESTRUCTIVE TO THE AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP. LABOR'S CAM-
PAIGN COINCIDED WITH WEIZMAN'S OWN PUBLIC DISSENT OVER
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THE RESPONSE, BEGIN'S DECLINE IN HEALTH AND VIGOR, AND
THE RENEWAL OF AGITATION WITHIN THE DMC TO BOLT THE
COALITION. THE GOVERNMENT APPEARED TO LACK DIRECTION
AND COHESION.

5. THEN CAME SHIMON PERES' SUCCESSFUL VIENNA TALKS,
WHICH SEEMED TO PRODUCE NEW MOMENTUM FOR THE PARTY. THE
BRANDT-KREISKY STATEMENT FOLLOWING PERES' MEETING WITH
SADAT REPRESENTED THE ALIGNMENT'S FIRST SOLID ACHIEVEMENT
SINCE ITS ROUT IN LAST YEAR'S ELECTION. ALMOST IMMEDIATELY
OVER-SHADOWED BY WEIZMAN'S SALZBURG TRIP AND THE LEEDS
CASTLE TALKS, THE IMPACT OF THE BRANDT-KREISKY STATEMENT
ON THE PUBLIC WAS BRIEF. YET IT IMPROVED ALIGNMENT
MORALE AND GAVE THE PARTY A NEW PURPOSE. MOMENTARILY ON
THE DEFENSIVE, THE LIKUD, AND BEGIN IN PARTICULAR, REACTED
WITH A SHRILLNESS THAT WAS INTENSIFIED WHEN ALIGNMENT
LEADERS PUBLICLY QUESTIONED BEGIN'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL
FITNESS. AS A RESULT, A BITTERNESS WAS INJECTED INTO
ALIGNMENT-LIKUD RELATIONS WHICH SERVED TO SHARPEN THE
POLITICAL STRUGGLE.

6. IN THE LAST THREE WEEKS, LABOR'S CAMPAIGN HAS FALTERED
AND NOW SEEMS TO BE MARKING TIME PENDING THE OUTCOME OF
THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT. SOME OF THE WIND WAS TAKEN OUT
OF ALIGNMENT SAILS WITH THE GOI'S SHIFT TOWARD MODERATION
ON THE FUTURE OF THE WEST BANK AS SEEN IN DAYAN'S JULY 24
POLICY STATEMENT BEFORE THE KNESSET ON HIS RETURN FROM
LEEDS CASTLE. A FEW DAYS LATER SADAT'S PUBLIC DEMAND
FOR ISRAEL'S AGREEMENT TO TOTAL WITHDRAWAL AS A PRECONDI-
TION FOR RENEWING DIRECT TALKS CAST DOUBT ON PERES'
ACHIEVEMENT AT VIENNA.

7. WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT, WHICH
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ALIGNMENT SPOKESMEN WERE QUICK TO WELCOME, THE PARTY HAS
SETTLED BACK TO WAIT-AND-SEE. RATHER THAN RISK THE
OPPROBRIUM OF UNDERMINING THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON
THE EVE OF DELICATE AND CRITICAL NEGOTIATIONS, LABOR HAS
MODULATED ITS ATTACK TO A PITCH JUST SUFFICIENTLY LOUD
TO BE ABLE TO SAY, "I TOLD YOU SO," IF THE SUMMIT SHOULD

FAIL. ON AUGUST 10, THE LABOR PARTY CALLED ON THE GOVERNMENT TO REDUCE THE RISKS OF FAILURE BY RETURNING TO A DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES AND STATING EXPLICITLY ITS READINESS "TO WITHDRAW FROM TERRITORIES ON THE WEST BANK TO DEFENSIBLE BORDERS."

8. MEANWHILE, THE RECRIMINATIONS AND BITTER RIVALRIES ENDEMIC IN THE LABOR PARTY SHOW SIGNS OF FLARING UP AGAIN AFTER A SHORT PERIOD OF QUIESCENCE. RABIN, WHO DETESTS PERES AND REMAINS AMBITIOUS FOR A COMEBACK, HAS RECENTLY EMBARKED ON A CAMPAIGN OF SPEECHES AND FENCE-MENDING, MAKING HIM LOOK VERY MUCH LIKE A CANDIDATE. HE HAS BEEN IN FRIENDLY CONTACT WITH NRP LEADERS (WHOM HE TOSSED OUT OF HIS GOVERNMENT IN DECEMBER 1976, PRECIPITATING LAST YEAR'S KNESSET ELECTION), AND LAST WEEK HE ADDRESSED A MEETING OF "BAMA" (PLATFORM), A FORUM FOR DAYAN ADMIRERS WHICH CUTS ACROSS PARTY LINES. HOWEVER, THERE IS NO PRESENT CHALLENGE TO PERES' LEADERSHIP, AND HIS PERCH IS SECURE. HIS VIENNA ACCOMPLISHMENT, HOWEVER TRANSITORY, WAS MORE A PERSONAL SUCCESS THAN A PARTY VICTORY AND IMPROVED HIS POSITION.

9. ALTHOUGH SOME IN LABOR'S LEADERSHIP WISHFULLY ANTICIPATED THE EARLY COLLAPSE OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT AND ITS REPLACEMENT BY AN ALIGNMENT-LED COALITION, MOST OF THE

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O 241808Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
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LEADERSHIP, INCLUDING PERES, NOW BELIEVE THAT LABOR'S CHANCE WILL NOT COME BEFORE THE NEXT ELECTION. MANY LABOR INSIDERS HAVE LITTLE INTEREST IN FORMING A WEAK, FRAGMENTED GOVERNMENT WHICH, GIVEN THE CURRENT DISTRIBUTION OF KNESSET SEATS, THEY SEE AS THE LIKELY RESULT OF A COALITION BUILT AROUND LABOR. SOME ALSO REJECT LABOR'S JOINING THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT OR ONE REORGANIZED UNDER, SAY, WEIZMAN. THEY HAVE TOLD US THAT LABOR COULD ONLY LOSE AS A JUNIOR PARTNER TO THE LIKUD.

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10. THE THIN SILVER LINING IN THE ALIGNMENT'S DEFEAT LAST YEAR WAS THE TIME IT AFFORDED FOR REFORM AND REJUVENATION. THE YEARS IN POWER HAD STEADILY MOVED LABOR AWAY FROM ITS PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS. OUT OF POWER, LABOR HAS BECOME MORE IDEOLOGICAL, AND TRUE TO THE LAWS OF POLITICAL DYNAMICS, THE LIKUD HAS GROWN MORE PRAGMATIC SINCE ACHIEVING POWER. LABOR HAS ALSO IMPROVED THE CALIBER OF ITS REPRESENTATION IN ONE OF THE WELL-SPRINGS OF ITS POWER, THE HISTADRUT. AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, IT HAS BEEN CAREFUL NOT TO ABANDON THE CENTER BY MOVING LEFT. AS PERES HIMSELF RECENTLY TOLD US, "THERE ARE NO VOTES TO LABOR'S LEFT; WITNESS THE EXAMPLES OF SHELLI AND MAPAM. OUR REVIVAL MUST IN LARGE PART BE BASED ON AN APPEAL TO THE CENTER-RIGHT OF THE ELECTORATE." NOVEMBER'S COUNTRY-WIDE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS MAY TEST THIS THEORY, EVEN THOUGH THE ALIGNMENT IS RESIGNED TO SUSTAINING CONSIDERABLE LOSSES FROM ITS SHOWING IN THE LAST POLLING FOR LOCAL OFFICES (L973).

11. OVERALL, THE ALIGNMENT'S FORTUNES IN THE SHORT RUN HANG ON THE OUTCOME OF THE CAMP DAVID CONFERENCE. SUCCESS THERE, BY ANY MEASURE, WILL MEAN A NEW STRUGGLE BY THE PARTY FOR RELEVANCY. ON THE OTHER HAND, SHOULD THE SUMMIT FAIL, THE BATTLE WILL BE JOINED BETWEEN THE LIKUD AND THE ALIGNMENT AS TO THE GOVERNMENT'S CULPABILITY. IT COULD WELL BE THE ISSUE TO PROPEL LABOR'S COMEBACK.

12. IN THE MEANTIME, ITS LEADERS ARE UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT A RETURN TO POWER IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER. THE

MOST RECENT POLLS (LATE JULY) WOULD GIVE IT A FEW MORE SEATS THAN IT CURRENTLY HAS, BUT THE GAIN WOULD BE AT THE EXPENSE OF THE DMC -- NOT THE LIKUD. (THE LATTER WOULD ALSO INCREASE ITS REPRESENTATION IN THE KNESSET.)
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LABOR'S RECOVERY IS IMPEDED BY SEVERAL INTERNAL HANDICAPS. THE PARTY DID NOT UNDERGO A HOUSECLEANING AFTER ITS ELECTION DEBACLE AND IT CONTINUES TO PRESENT THE SAME OLD FACES. LABOR'S BIG FOUR -- PERES, RABIN, ALLON AND EBAN -- ARE OLD-GUARD HOLDOVERS FROM THE PAST. FOR CHARISMATIC APPEAL, PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT AMONG THE SEPHARDI COMMUNITY, THE ALIGNMENT HAS NO ONE TO MATCH BEGIN OR WEIZMAN.

13. THERE IS ALSO NO SIGN THAT THE ALIGNMENT HAS COME TO GRIPS WITH THE PROBLEM OF RELATING ITS IDEOLOGY TO WHAT CONCERNS THE PUBLIC -- ESPECIALLY IN THE REALM OF FOREIGN POLICY. THE PARTY IS IN DANGER OF MOVING AWAY FROM THE CONSTITUENCY THAT IT MUST COURT TO SURVIVE AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE. THIS CONSTITUENCY, CONSISTING OF THE URBAN WORKING CLASS AND ISRAEL'S DISADVANTAGED SEPHARDI COMMUNITY, IS FUNDAMENTALLY MORE HAWKISH THAN THE ALIGNMENT'S IDEOLOGUES. BEFORE MAY 1977, THE LEGITIMACY OF POWER ATTRACTED VOTES FROM THE MAINSTREAM, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE PARTY'S MODERATE FOREIGN POLICY. IN OPPOSITION, LABOR MUST FIND THE RIGHT FORMULA OF OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE LIKUD'S MAXIMALISM WHILE AVOIDING THE NARROW CONFINES OF A DOCTRINAIRE PARTY OUT OF STEP WITH THE MASSES. THIS IS NOT YET HAPPENING. LEWIS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REPORTS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 24 aug 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TELAV10906
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780347-0450
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780826/aaaaavkq.tel
Line Count: 366
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 6b47105c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 7
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Reference: 78 TEL AVIV 10497
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 10 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1628067
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE STATE OF THE ALIGNMENT: SLOW TO RECOVER AND WAITING FOR CAMP DAVID
TAGS: PINT, IS
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/6b47105c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014